

I took my daughter on a Black History Road trip

Knowledge is power, and sometimes it takes more than just love for a white mom to prepare her Black teen daughter for the world we live in.

By [Sylvia Kyle](#) February 28, 2021



Photo: Courtesy of Sylvia Kyle – artwork of artist Dennis K. Smith

My daughter, Aimée* [joined our family](#) two years ago at age 15. During that time, I've showered her with love and attention, and the bond between us is heartfelt. But in spite of the adoption-marketing cliché “All you need is love,” I knew this Canadian-born girl of African heritage needed more than that from me—a white, Scottish-born Canadian—to grow up to be a proud and confident Black woman. [We discuss race, culture and social justice regularly](#), but we also acknowledge with frustration—and, at the worst of times, tears—that there's a gap between how we experience the world that no amount of talking can fully bridge. Around a quarter of the kids at Aimée's Toronto school are Black, however, there is only one Black teacher. The lack of representation on staff shows in the dearth of Black authors, icons and [race-related material covered in classes](#). Aimée has a passion for history and was craving a deeper understanding of events and historical figures that would resonate for her as a young Black woman. When this issue came up, my first impulse was to call the school administration. (But that's another story for another time.) My second impulse: road trip!

We live about four hours from the of Essex County and the municipality of Chatham-Kent, which border the US on the southernmost tip of Ontario, along the Detroit River. These were once key regions on the Underground Railroad. So, one weekend, not long after that chat, we hit the 401.

With the assistance of Chatham-Kent Tourism and Tourism Windsor Essex Pelee Island, I crafted an itinerary that encompassed everything from slavery—both in Canada and the US—to African-influenced architecture to Canada’s not-so-proud history of segregated schools. Aimée had taken Black culture and history trips to Nova Scotia and Jamaica in the past, and she was excited to learn more so close to home.

“You can almost feel the sadness down here, when you think of people having to hide,” says Lana Talbot, our guide and a member of the congregation at Sandwich First Baptist Church, the first stop on our journey. This is one of the oldest active Black churches in Canada, built by formerly enslaved people in 1851. Talbot brings us down into the crawlspace, under the floorboards, where terrified families used to crouch for hours, hidden from the bounty hunters who came looking for them to haul back across the border into enslavement after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was enacted in the US.



The church was built by hand with bricks made from clay pulled from the Detroit River. Many of the volunteers had to walk several hours there and back from neighbouring towns to participate in the build. This came to be a place that symbolized survival, collaboration, faith and hope for the future. You didn’t just learn Black history in this place of worship and safe haven, you felt it.

Talbot shows us the artwork of artist Dennis K. Smith hanging in the church’s gathering space—along with some of it her own.